

Katharine Barr



Chairman Pavlov and Committee Members:

Thank you for allowing Michigan Communities for Local Control to speak to your Committee today.

MCLC was formed by two mothers, myself and Lynn Jacobs, who have children in Michigan's public school system. We are not lobbyists, politicians, or a special interest group. We are two citizens that spearheaded a statewide grassroots movement in opposition to the schools of choice mandate. Our support reaches as far east as the leaders of Detroit and as far west as Rockford and Coopersville Public School Systems. Our message is simple: Leave education policy-making at the local level. Do not mandate all public school districts to participate in the Schools of Choice program. Do not force school districts to fill their classrooms to capacity. Mandated Schools of Choice could erode certain school districts away completely. Our message of local control has been well received by all communities we have been in contact with.

Our research has shown that there has been general confusion about who, other than the Governor, is pushing this legislation. Today we'd like to address some of that confusion with hard data we have accumulated through our research and outreach.

We are very clear that MCLC's mission is not opposed to Schools of Choice. Our research has shown that, used responsibly, schools of choice is an effective tool for students and school districts alike. In fact, 98 percent of all public school districts in the state of Michigan participate in Schools of Choice (105, 105c, and ISD level) which begs the answer to the question: Why mandate a program that is growing organically on it's on? From 2004 to 2010 Schools of Choice participation has increased by 70%. Clearly, Government regulation is not needed regarding choice. You may then ask the question: What's the big deal mandating the remaining two percent to participate? The answer lies in HOW each district participates. Each unique district, which represents a unique community, participates in Choice according to how they can responsibly serve their resident and non-resident students. Some communities desire smaller class sizes, some communities enjoy the benefits of more funding that arrives with every added student in the form of new and better facilities. This is why we see blanket policy as a bad idea. How can the state know how to responsibly implement Choice in over 550 school districts?

Another reason some districts are wary of mandated Schools of Choice is one of fiscal concern. Mike Paskewicz, the Superintendent for Northview Public Schools, allowed me to relay this message to your Committee:

"Senator Pavlov's committee is operating with inaccurate data. An aide in Governor Snyder's office called because of some positive statements I made in a Grand Rapids Press article regarding choice and our ability to keep our academic performance high despite changing demographics. He stated that the State web-site indicates that Northview does not participate in choice. The fact is - we participate in the Kent Intermediate School District program, along with the other 22 districts in KISD. He was not aware of this fact. I also shared that I believe the attempt to have legislation that mandates participation in the State Choice program is a solution looking for a problem that does not exist.

One other observation - districts that are attempting to pass facility bond issues in their community are facing an interesting dynamic driven by schools of choice. Some of our resident taxpayers are making statements that they should not have to increase their property taxes to pay for facility improvements and the schools of choice families do not have to increase their taxes. Families that have left their home district for a school of choice are not convinced they should have to raise their taxes for their home district as they do not go to school there and would not benefit from the improved facilities."

On the other side of this debate, supporters of this bill have said that Michigan Students are trapped, a claim that cannot be supported by the data: In 2010 40% of DPS eligible students left DPS for an astounding 182 other LEAs. Which bring me to our next point and an area of concern for districts like DPS.

I had the opportunity to speak in depth with the President of the Detroit Board of Education, Tyrone Winfrey. He opposes this mandate for this reason: DPS is making solid educational progress with building renovations, innovative progressive class offerings, and coming to school campaigns. How can DPS rebuild when the State is effectively urging students to leave? How can Detroit rebuild when the State is not trying to help the City retain students? And what is the answer for the families left at DPS and like-Districts that have now lost so much money that they cannot afford rebuild. All communities deserve quality community schools. Instead of blanket policy making, what about individualized district support and proven district-specific policy changes such as Early Childhood Development, smaller classroom sizes in the early grades, and a longer school year?

On the issue of capacity: Proponents of this bill argue that because the student population in Michigan has declined by 7% since 2004 that districts should have capacity for more students. That could not be further from the truth. Because of already tight budgets, school districts have shed over ten percent of their teachers meaning there is actually a higher student-to-teacher ratio. Capacity is not dictated by building space, it's dictated by the number of teachers hired. For districts turning to schools of choice for financial reasons, this higher student to teacher ratio may not be of big concern, but for parents that value smaller class sizes it is a big educational concern.

In summary, Michigan Communities for Local Control represents a growing number of Michigan Citizens who are increasingly skeptical of Lansing policy that directly affects their children's classrooms. The State's reasons for supporting this bill cannot be supported by data. Michigan

Communities for Local Control seeks to Empower Parents by preserving their vote and their voice in their children's local schools. If you want to Empower Parents, do not mandate larger class sizes. If you seek to Empower Parents, let them choose how and when to implement schools of choice.

Thank you.